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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 BRATISLAVA 000476

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: WILL SMER SWEEP THE REGIONAL ELECTIONS?

REF: BRATISLAVA 462

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¶1. Summary. On November 14, Slovak voters will elect regional parliaments in each of the eight Higher Territorial Units (VUC) and a chairman or 'zupan' of each VUC. These will be the third regional elections in Slovakia's sixteen-year history. If no zupan candidate wins in the first round, a second round follows on November 28. According to Slovak pollsters, less than twenty percent turnout is expected (in 2005, turnout was eighteen percent). Regional elections do not attract Slovak voters, as most have only minimal information about VUC competencies. Low voter turn-out may help parties with historically disciplined voters, or new parties with enthusiastic supporters. Prime Minister Fico's SMER is expected to have the most success, which will help the party gear up for the June parliamentary elections. Jan Slota's Slovak National Party (SNS) could lose ground as compared to the 2005 VUC elections, since SMER has excluded it from several regional coalitions, apparently due to recent corruption scandals. End Summary.

#### Background

¶2. Regional elections will be held on November 14, 2009. The election campaign period started 17 days prior to elections and ends 48 hours before election day. In a single-round contest, voters directly elect the 412 members of the regional parliaments, which is one VUC MP for every 12 to 15 thousand inhabitants. The candidates with the highest number of votes win positions in the regional parliaments. In contrast, VUC zupans need an absolute majority. If no one candidate gets an absolute majority in the first round, the top two enter a run-off. In the second round a simple majority determines the zupan.

#### ¶3. Party acronyms:

SMER-SD -- Robert Fico's ruling party -- Social Democratic 'Direction'

SDKU-DS -- Mikulas Dzurinda's opposition Party of the Democratic and Christian Union

HZDS-LS -- Vladimir Meciar's Party of the Movement for a Democracy

KDH -- Jan Figel's Christian Democratic Movement

SNS -- Jan Slota's Slovak National Party

SMK -- Pal Csaky's Hungarian Coalition Party

MOST-HID -- Bela Bugar's splinter party from SMK ('Bridge')

SaS -- Richard Sulik's Freedom and Solidarity Party

DS -- Democratic Party

OKS -- Civic Conservative Party

SZS -- Slovak Green Party

SF -- Free Forum

#### Regional Elections a Warm-Up for next June?

¶4. Clearly, PM Fico's goal is to win the zupan seat in all regions, even if that means luring popular candidates away from their former parties or discarding troublesome incumbents.

Comprehensive victory will help further entrench SMER's regional support structures, providing money and human resources for next June's parliamentary elections. Despite the traditional lack of interest in the zupan races, zupans have a broad range of competencies, that include control of financial resources, community services, the transportation sector and real estate assets. They also have access to EU regional development funds.

We believe SMER has a good chance to win all eight zupan positions, though Banska Bystrica, if infighting between the leading candidates continues, and Bratislava, a traditional SDKU-opposition stronghold, will present the most difficult challenges.

¶5. Interestingly, in four of the eight races, SMER has formed coalitions with HzDS for the zupan race and excluded SNS. Some believe that this could be a harbinger of coalition changes to come, as SNS has lately come under fire for a series of corruption scandals (reftel). Alternatively, one could view Fico's strategy as a way of co-opting HzDS's long-standing regional support structures, while HzDS gradually fades into oblivion. In the latest political preference poll, released by the MVK agency on November 3, SMER won a whopping 42 percent of

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the vote. SDKU, its closest competition, earned a distant 12 percent. Six additional parties: KDH, SMK, MOST, HzDS, SNS, and SaS, all earned between 5 and 10 percent of the electorate. However, HzDS, SMK, MOST, and SaS are all within one percent of the 5 percent threshold, which is a precarious position.

#### Coalitions : Primarily SMER-HZDS (-SNS) Against SDKU-KDH

¶6. Fifty-six candidates are running for the eight VUC zupan slots. In contrast to previous regional elections, which were characterized by unconventional coalitions consisting of both opposition and government candidates, this year the slates are divided into national level coalition and opposition camps in seven of the eight regions. The exception is Nitra, where similarly to 2005, a Slovak coalition of both opposition and coalition parties has been established to prevent the ethnic Hungarian SMK from winning a majority in the VUC parliament. According to Grisa Meseznikov, a prominent political analyst and Director of the Institute for Public Affairs (IVO), current coalitions reflect both party ideology and the state of coalition cooperation.

¶7. Bratislava VUC has ten zupan candidates. Vladimir Bajan, the incumbent, is running as an independent with the support of SMER, HZDS, Greens-SZS, and HZD. He is followed by opposition candidate and SDKU MP, Pavol Freso (supported by SDKU, KDH, OKS, SaS) and independent Branislav Zahradnik, the current head of the Bratislava transportation company. Robert Beno, former Markiza moderator, is running for the MOST-HID party and Jaroslav Paska, former defense minister, is up for SNS.

¶8. Banska Bystrica VUC has nine zupan candidates. Vladimir Manka, a current MEP, is supported by SMER and HzDS, and leads the polls. Incumbent zupan Milan Murgas was a SMER nominee last election but has had such dismal performance that SMER decided not to renominate him. Murgas decided to run for reelection as an independent, and was subsequently expelled from the party.

Manka and Murgas have been engaging in mutual smear campaigns, potentially paving the way for Jozef Mikus, the candidate representing the opposition SDKU, KDH, OKS, KDS and SaS, to make it to the second round.

¶9. Kosice VUC has eight zupan candidates. Out of them, only two are relevant players: Zdenko Trebula, the incumbent and overwhelming favorite, is supported by SMER, MOST, SMK, HZD, and SF. Jan Suli, presently a regional councilman, is running for the opposition coalition of SDKU, KDH, KDS, SaS, OKS and DS.

¶10. Trencin VUC has six zupan candidates. The strongest are current chairman Pavol Sedlacek supported by SMER, HZDS, and SNS, and Martin Fedor, former defense minister, running on a SDKU-KDH coalition slate. The former mayor and former SDKU MP Juraj Liska is running as independent.

¶11. Trnava VUC has four candidates registered for zupan. Tibor Mikus, the incumbent, is supported by SMER, SNS, HZD and SZS. Mikus, a former deputy chairman of HzDS (who quit the party two years ago) and former director of the nuclear plant at Jaslovske Bohunice during Meciar's government, is so confident he will win based on his performance over the last term that he does not need to campaign. The other three candidates are former Agriculture Minister Miroslav Jurena for HZDS, Gabor Gal for MOST-Hid, and Gabriel Pavelek for KDH-SDKU. Mikus is the target of new campaign ads, that accuse him of concluding 'secret agreements' with members of SMK. Jurena was immediately suspected of being behind the ads, which he denies.

¶12. Zilina VUC has four running candidates for zupan, the strongest one being Juraj Blanar, the incumbent, who is supported by a coalition of SMER, HZDS, and SNS. His rival Pavel Pavlasek runs for opposition coalition made of KDH, SDKU, DS, and OKS.

¶13. Presov VUC (most populous with 768,719 inhabitants) has ten zupan candidates, of which three are relevant: Peter Chudik, the incumbent and favorite is supported by SMER and HZDS; Jan Hudacky for KDH, SDKU, SaS, and Pavel Hagyari, the mayor of Presov supported by a coalition of small regional parties.

#### The Exception

¶14. Nitra VUC has five zupan candidates. The strongest, Milan Belica, the current zupan, is supported by the all-Slovak coalition made of SMER, SDKU, KDH, SNS, who have put aside their differences to eliminate any chance of an ethnic Hungarian zupan. SMK nominee for zupan, Agnes Biro, lamented the political quarantine in which SMK finds itself in Nitra. She fears that increasingly nationalist rhetoric in the campaign will further impede cross-border cooperation with Hungary. Biro

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acknowledged that SMK's deputy zupan in Nitra from 1995-2000 was widely viewed as corrupt, but thought that his misdeeds should no longer prevent SMK's success in regional structures. Currently, of the 52 regional parliamentarians in Nitra, 17 are members of SMK.

#### Comment

¶15. Many observers cite extremely low turnout (some expect as low as 12 percent) and general lack of interest in regional government as reasons that regional elections should not be used to predict next June's national elections. While true, we believe it will be most interesting to watch how Fico and SMER play smaller would-be coalition members off of one another. This is certainly the case with SNS, HzDS, and both of the Hungarian parties.

EDDINS